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Developmental Biology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/developmentalbiology

2015 BSDB Spring Meeting report



Last year I attended the 73rd Society for Developmental Biology Meeting in Seattle, WA thinking that I would have the chance to meet new people and learn about cool research in a location that I had never been. I was a graduate student in Elena Silva Casey's lab at Georgetown University studying the role of Sox21 in regulating neurogenesis during early embryonic development. Little did I know that one year later I would have the opportunity to do the same thing on a completely different continent! When I was selected as a finalist for the Best Student Competition at SDB, I was excited and honored to be considered. As I stood on the stage during the closing banquet alongside the other finalists, I anxiously awaited the announcement of the winners. I was pleasantly surprised when my name was called for first place. I had never won such a big prize before, and I was happy to be among my elite peers. As my prize, I was awarded a trip to attend the British Society for Developmental Biology Spring Meeting in the United Kingdom. I had never been to Europe, nor had I been off of North America, so it was a great deal for me to take this trip. I was nervous about going all the way to England on my own, but I could not pass up the opportunity to attend the BSDB Meeting, learn about innovative research, and meet people on the other side of the world!

The BSDB Meeting was held jointly with the British Society for Cell Biology at the University of Warwick in Coventry, UK which is about two hours outside of London. Coventry was a beautiful city, with a combination of countryside and city life. The University of Warwick had a vast campus and the hospitality shown to the delegates in attendance was superb. The meeting opened with the first plenary session talk given by Brigid Hogan (Duke University, USA). Dr. Hogan talked about the location and plasticity of stem cells in the adult lung and the molecular pathways involved in the maintenance and repair of lung tissue. Even through jetlag, I could see that the meeting was off to a great start. Another interesting talk came from Caroline Dean (John Innes Centre, UK) who discussed the roles of non-coding RNA and chromatin remodeling in allowing plants to determine seasons. Kiyokazu Agata (Kyoto University, Japan) gave a really cool talk about regeneration in planarians and how blastema stem cells are activated to generate the proper body plan. Additionally, Wieland Huttner (Max Planck Institute of Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics, Germany) discussed the evolution of brain size, and in particular the genomic changes that account for increased cortical expansion, which is characteristic of human brains compared to other vertebrates. These are just a few of the many amazing talks from the meeting.

One of the highlights of the meeting was the Hooke Medal Award presented to Lewis Wolpert (University College London, UK). Dr. Wolpert is considered one of the “grandfathers” of developmental biology and has not only produced influential work in the field, but has also trained many great biologists who also contributed greatly to the field of development. Dr. Wolpert told the story of how his career changed from being an engineer to being one of the significant minds of developmental biology. His key piece of advice during his talk was that if you are unhappy in your career don't be afraid to change it. Dr. Wolpert was not only relatable, but his life and his work showed us all that we should all strive to be happy, and in that happiness we can contribute great works.

My favorite time of the meeting was actually the poster sessions, where they also had vendor demonstrations. At this time I was able to meet an array of people from all over the world. I learned about a lot of new products, but I was also able to talk to both vendors and presenters about the work that they do, and how they got to the positions that they are currently holding. During my poster session, I had an opportunity to chat with Dr. Hogan. She was very approachable and gave me a lot of excellent advice regarding my career. She was very interested in my work, and encouraged me to pursue whatever career I aimed for, although she hoped it would be in academia. Because there are so few Blacks in the sciences, and even fewer Black women, it is important to encourage and promote those of us who are present, and Dr. Hogan did just that. She reminded me that my potential to



do great things is only limited by my own drive to do them. She was very helpful in getting me to think about where I want to be, and even offered to be a mentor to me. Meeting her and talking with her was one of the best parts of my trip.

During the closing banquet, I was supposed to interview the winner of the BSDDB Best Student Poster Competition to continue the chain of winner interviews [for the Node]. The prize for this competition is to attend the 74th SDB Meeting in Snowbird, Utah. Unfortunately, the winner of the award, Wendy Gu (University of Cambridge, UK), did not attend the banquet. However, thanks to the marvels of technology we were able to do the interview by Skype. It was an interesting approach, but it worked out and Wendy and I were able to conduct the interview from two different parts of the world!

Currently I am a postdoctoral fellow in Susan Wray's lab

at the National Institutes of Health. I am continuing my studies to characterize the function of Sox21 by looking at its role in olfactory development and neurogenesis. Traveling to the BSDDB Meeting changed my life and my outlook on my career. It opened my eyes to another part of the world, with a different culture and many different types of people speaking languages from all over the world. This trip allowed me to meet various people at various stages of their careers, and provoked me to really think about where my life is headed. I am beyond grateful for this opportunity and I will cherish it for a lifetime.

Niteace Whittington
National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, United States
E-mail address: miucas@sdbonline.org